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ABSTRACT

A large undergraduate course in persuasion which is taught to multiple sections of 70 students (and has in the past been taught to sections with as many as 200 students) at Northern Illinois University required several innovations to handle the large numbers of students and to enliven such large classes. Innovations include: (1) the creative use of undergraduate teaching assistants (who are assigned about 18 students each, who are available before and after class and during specified office hours, and who conduct extensive study sessions); (2) creating an informal and lively atmosphere in the classroom (including a technique/game used to help instructor and students memorize each student's name); (3) interactive handouts and lecture outlines; (4) careful but fair--even generous--tests, review sessions and study guides for tests, bonus items on tests, the creation of test items on an ongoing and cumulative basis, and the use of an extra credit assignment for borderline grades and the development of classroom materials including audio-visual aids and various kinds of handouts; and (5) the frequent use of guest speakers. (SR)

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Innovative Approaches to Teaching
The Large Persuasion Class

by

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(A paper delivered at the Speech Communication
Association convention, Chicago, IL. Nov. 1-4.)

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The undergraduate course in persuasion at Northern Illinois University is presently being taught to multiple sections of 70 students with registration for majors and minors only and then by permit only. It has been taught to sections with as many as 200 students. We regularly turn away 500-600 students who request the course but who are either not majors or minors or who do not yet have at least junior class standing. If the course were offered without permits being required, the number of students requesting the course could easily double. The course has a reputation as a difficult one and as being one among the most conservative in terms of the average grade given. Because the course is so large, several innovations have been necessary to handle the large numbers. Some of these are fostering an informal and interactive class atmosphere where students feel that they are known by the instructor and fellow classmates, fair objective tests and grading, and the development of classroom materials--audiovisual and otherwise.

Classroom Atmosphere

Several innovations have been particularly successful in creating an informal and comfortable class atmosphere in which students do not feel like mere ciphers. First, each student is assigned to an undergraduate teaching

assistant who is available before and after class and during specified office hours for any help in the readings, lecture material, and written assignments. These undergraduate assistants handle about 18 students each and thus can get to know them on an individual basis. They receive 1 credit of "Practicum" credit--a departmental requirement that can be fulfilled in a variety of ways--more of which will be described later in this essay. This gives the individual student at least one person, besides the instructor, with whom they can formally discuss the class and any problems they might be having. The undergraduate assistants also conduct extensive study sessions prior to tests.

Another technique used to make the class informal is to memorize each student's name, using a technique called the "Name Game." On the first day of class, the instructor reads the class roll and tries to memorize five names--students who are visibly distinctive work best--the tallest person in class, the student with the beard; one who looks like a famous person; or the sibling of a former student are all good first lessons. After reading the roll a second time to refresh the instructor's memory, the second class meeting is really the first time the game is really played. All students are asked to sit near their

undergraduate assistant. The first four students in the front row are asked to stand and state their first names. Each is quizzed on the other three names, and then the next four are asked to stand while the first four remain standing. The new group give their name, but now students are responsible for eight names. Subsequent groups of four give their names as the size of the name pool grows. Several tricks are useful in playing the game. First, because the instructor has already memorized a half dozen or more names, he or she can call on these persons by name--very impressive to students who are used to being anonymous. Further, since the instructor is conducting the game, he or she continually returns to past names reviewing them outloud for the class and him or herself as well, saying things like "Dave, who is on either side of the two Kathy's?" This reinforces not only Dave's name and the names of both Kathy's but checks on the names on either side of the two Kathy's. Another trick is to use visual "hooks" for certain names--for example anyone named "Mike" is imagined holding a microphone in his hand; any girl named Laura, Lori, or Laurel is imagined as having a wreath of laurel around her head; Eric's are imagined with viking helmets; Kurts are dressed as German soldiers; Nancy's are peeking through a magnifying glass at the back

of an old clock; Ann's are imagined carrying their head like Ann Bolyng; Sandy's are sunbathing on a sandy beach, David's hold slingshots ready to fight Goliath; Michelle's stand on a seashell, Tom's beat tom-toms and so on. The initial session takes about 20-25 minutes, during which various students are called on by name to in turn name other students. This gives the instructor a constant review as he or she must remember the name of student called on as well as other students being named. If the instructor has forgotten a name or two, this can be easily camouflaged by asking someone whose name is known to identify them or someone adjacent to the forgotten student. The student neighbor is then asked to identify the two persons on either side of themselves. At the end of the first 20 minute session, a contest between the instructor and a volunteer is conducted with the instructor naming the odd numbered students while the volunteer names the 2nd, 4th, 6th and so on. This serves as a final review. On the third day of class, the instructor reads the roll for a final time in order to refresh his or her memory and then a 15 minute version of the game is played. On the fourth day of class a 10 minute version is played. By the end of the fourth class, the instructor usually feels comfortable with at least

half the names, while the undergraduate assistants know the names of all their assigned students and can prompt when the instructor forgets. Most importantly, for the first time in many classes, the students know one another by name as well. The game has worked with a 125 enrollment and with the 200 enrollment class. After the fourth day, the instructor tries to call on students by name, being prompted by the undergraduate assistants when needed.

A third technique for making the large class seem informal is to encourage several kinds of interaction between and among students, undergraduate assistants, and the instructor. Some ways to develop interaction are to ask students to bring cartoons that have any kind of relevance to the class topics. These are put on transparencies, and the student shows his or her cartoon and explains its relevance. This also reinforces the student's name for the instructor and the class. Another is having a contest each semester for the "Worst Communication Joke" the students can find. At the end of the semester, academy awards can be given for these jokes (e.g., "in the worst taste," "least humorous," "most gross" etc.). Throughout the semester, it is useful for the instructor to reveal somethings about themselves. I

find that failure stories (e.g., "my most embarrassing moment," or "my worst talent") and conflict stories (e.g., "why I hate the dean" or "the trouble with my neighbor") are especially good. It is also useful to bring course-related but controversial or entertaining current examples to class--print or television advertisements always get good discussion going and can be displayed using transparencies in the case of print ads or re-played on videotape in the case of television. The undergraduate assistants are especially helpful in bringing in and conducting discussion of such instructional materials, many of which can be used in subsequent semesters. It is also useful to have lecture notes or at least outlines on overhead transparencies. Some textbooks even provide master copies of lecture outlines. Students seem to like getting that kind of organizational guidance. Publisher-provided videotapes and/or computerized materials are also very valuable.

Tests and Grading

Anytime class size exceeds fifty, it is difficult to have essay examinations, and at an enrollment of 70 or more, essay tests would be murderous, so most instructors of large courses use some kind of objective tests. Here is another area where the undergraduate assistant is

useful. One requirement for their assistantship credit is to prepare true/false or multiple choice items each day of class, based not on the lecture or book, but on the examples that are brought up and the discussion that ensues. This not only creates potential test items, but it encourages regular class attendance and provides the assistants with insight into test creation and improves their own abilities to prepare for exams.

I have three tests of 100 points each, and I grade on a 60, 70, 80, 90, scale based on cumulative averages unless the result is in too few "A's" or "B's," in which case, I reserve the right to lower my scale, but I will not raise it if the reverse is true. My students think this is imminently fair and always comment on that fact at the end of the term. I also ask 105 questions on each test so there are 5 bonus chances to score a full 100 points--another thing greatly appreciated by students. My make-up exams are always essay, and this greatly discourages late or early test requests.

One warning--never critique a test during class--it is like stirring up a hornet's nest of competing positions with each student arguing for a particular answer based on unique (sometimes highly creative) and individual interpretations of the questions or answers. Instead I

let the undergraduate teaching assistants critique the test on an individual basis, and if a conflict still remains, I resolve the conflict with the student--the results are usually (90% of the time) that the original answer stands.

It is also useful to develop your own "test question bank" across semesters. These can be initiated starting with the teacher's manual that accompanies some persuasion texts and can be supplemented by the items created by the undergraduate assistants as well as your own additions, modifications and updates. The "banked" items can be re-worked if necessary to develop reliability and discrimination power of the items, and items can be changed from semester to semester to reduce the fraternity test file system. I also put the instructor's manual on reserve in our learning lab for students to use. It helps them discover the kinds of questions I usually ask. I also prepare a study guide for each test on which I put all of the key concepts tested as well as the various optional foil answers for all multiple choice items.

Finally, I suggest that students turn in an extra credit assignment, to be used only if it helps their overall semester's grade. If they "touch close" to a

particular grade, this can become the "Great Pumpkin" factor in final grading.

The Development of Classroom Materials

In addition to the classroom aids provided by your textbook publisher (e.g., lecture note masters, suggested assignments, films and videotapes, computerized materials, etc.), high quality slide presentations have been prepared by the undergraduate teaching assistants and other practicum students. They get additional credit for developing these as well as a copy for themselves to use as part of their employment resume in case they apply for a job where those skills would be a plus. You can also frequently obtain agency reels of television spots or videotapes of specific spots--these are frequently just tossed out by television stations once their rotation is completed. Students find lecture outlines helpful, even if they are not provided for each and every lecture topic. These can be designed to be interactive with students filling in blanks and subsequently sharing their answers during class discussion (e.g., if I am trying to teach the map/territory distinction, I ask them to list 3 "maps"--a food they have never eaten, a place they have never been, and an experience they have never had--these are then shared and compared usually with the discovery that for

each map, some class member has a "territory"--they have eastern brains, visited Australia and/or gone para-sailing). Several publications have provided me with good cartoons, graphs, and other visuals, as well as excellent handouts and also cumulatively provide good and current examples for lecture. I suggest things like Advertising Age, and Electronic Media. I also find that keeping a clipping file is useful, even though it is sometimes messy. Finally, I try to get guest speakers in for short 20-30 minute presentations whenever possible--colloquia speakers who happen to be on hand, local politicians, advertisers, fellow instructors, and others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a variety of innovations that can enliven the large class in persuasion. They include the creative use of undergraduate teaching assistants, creating an informal and lively atmosphere in the classroom; interactive handouts and lecture outlines; careful but fair--even generous--tests, review sessions and study guides for tests, bonus items on tests, the creation of test items on an ongoing and cumulative basis, the use of an extra credit assignment for borderline grades and the development of classroom materials including audio-visual aids, handouts, and guest speakers.